

PINK-FOOTED AND GREYLAG GEESE IN BRITAIN

17th/18th November 1984

The 25th annual autumn census of Pink-footed Anser brachyrhynchus and Greylag Geese A. anser in Britain took place over the weekend of 17th/18th November 1984. The census was badly disrupted by poor weather and the totals of 86,000 Pinkfeet and 64,000 Greylags are not thought to be complete. They compare with 101,000 and 82,000 respectively in November 1983. Assessment of breeding success suggests that the Pinkfeet would have shown an increase in numbers this year while the Greylags might have stayed at about the same level. The breakdown of the counts is shown overleaf, together with the figures for mid-March 1984, not previously circulated.

Weather and general conditions

In the 25 years of these November counts, we have seldom experienced quite such bad weather over such a great part of the range. Only in south-west Scotland and north-west England were conditions reasonable, while over the entire eastern half of the country, but especially from the Borders north to Grampian, the weather was dire. Torrential rain fell for about a week up to and including the count weekend. This produced much flooding of streams and rivers, providing amply temporary roosting sites for the geese. The rain over the count weekend was associated with very low cloud and abysmal light, making counting the geese, whether at dawn or dusk flights, or out on the fields during the day, extremely difficult and frustrating. There is little doubt from the results, and from the comments of the counters, that many geese were missed.

This is an unfortunate way to celebrate 25 years of these November censuses, but one advantage of maintaining a long run of such counts is that occasional hiccups can be coped with. Given reasonable conditions for the next one or two censuses and we should be able to interpret this poor count a little better.

The harvest in 1984 was exceptionally early and clean, leaving little grain on those stubbles which were not quickly ploughed in and sown with winter barley. Goose food was available in some areas on harvested potato fields, where again the harvest was early, but because of the dry summer there were many small tubers to be left behind.

PINKFEET

The apparent drop of 16,000 geese since November 1983 is completely contrary to what was expected, given a breeding success of 20.2% young birds, and a mean brood size of 2.2. These figures are based on rather smaller samples than usual, just over 3000 birds aged, and only 33 broods; an inevitable consequence of the bad weather. This is the best breeding success to be recorded since 1980 and should have produced an increase on the 1983 total.

The March 1983 census gave a total of 88,000 Pinkfeet, a realistic drop from the 101,000 the previous November. Applying a 20% breeding success to this figure, and ignoring any possible mortality through the summer, gives a total of just under 106,000. We cannot, of course, know, by only finding 86,000 birds this November, that 20,000 went missing, but the higher figure is probably closer to the true population level.

The regional breakdown on page 3 shows the largest drops in east central and south-east Scotland, both areas in the worst of the weather, but also with the very clean harvests. The increase

Numbers of Pinkfeet and Greylags in Britain, Nov.1983 to Nov.1984

	PINKFEET			GREYLAGS		
	13 Nov 1983	19 Mar 1984	18 Nov 1984	13 Nov 1983	19 Mar 1984	18 Nov 1984
Orkney	-	-	-	680	870	310
Highland						
Caithness	-	-	-	7450	1200	1700
Sutherland	-	-	-	3130	-	-
Ross & Cromarty	40	3750	410	1070	1480	5530
Inverness	-	1600	-	500	280	-
Nairn	-	-	-	-	10	50
Badenoch & Strathspey	-	-	-	410	540	1360
Grampian						
Moray	-	-	-	810	1250	1860
Banff & Buchan	2850	3350	8850	5600	4250	2230
Gordon	10700	11000	7400	7020	10940	6920
Kincardine & Deeside	-	-	-	6000	1300	7050
Tayside						
Angus	13220	4040	11860	7900	360	4530
Perth & Kinross	14260	11740	11780	18230	4930	12060
Central						
Stirling	3730	4430	1350	250	2620	350
Fife	8000	3100	2500	1250	-	-
Lothian						
West Lothian	2000	370	490	1980	-	580
Midlothian	13600	830	70	930	-	220
East Lothian	3420	-	4580	720	320	250
Borders						
Tweeddale	3600	1160	2700	30	-	-
Roxburgh	1800	1650	3000	3850	1620	1260
Berwickshire	3340	20	-	580	-	930
Strathclyde						
Argyll & Bute	-	-	-	3570	2310	4170
Cunningham	-	-	-	130	210	170
Dunbarton	-	-	-	350	300	2000
Strathkelvin	-	-	-	-	180	304
Lanark	290	190	1140	-	160	-
Renfrew	-	-	-	-	220	150
Kyle & Carrick	-	-	-	490	420	580
Dumfries & Galloway						
Wigtown	-	9510	-	3320	1800	2580
Stewartry	-	-	-	1900	2180	2280
Nithsdale	2620	20850	4630	300	2750	720
Cumbria	20	3950	-	800	830	630
Lancashire	16280	4800	15610	-	-	-
Northumberland	80	-	190	2300	4930	3520
Humberside	-	400	-	-	-	-
Lincolnshire	300	220	320	-	-	-
Norfolk	970	1070	9000	-	-	-
 BRITISH TOTAL	 <u>101000</u>	 <u>88000</u>	 <u>86000</u>	 <u>82000</u>	 <u>48000</u>	 <u>64000</u>

in east England is accounted for by large numbers in the east Wash and north Norfolk, arriving earlier than usual.

A feature of the March 1984 count was the great concentration of geese on the Solway, with some 34,000 in the area. In comparison with previous March counts, numbers were down in south-east and east-central Scotland.

GREYLAGS

The breeding success of this species was 15.8% with a mean brood size of 2.6. The sample sizes of 1300 birds and 25 broods are less than half the normal, and must therefore be treated with some caution. However, it is unusual for the two species to have widely differing breeding success in the same year, so it is likely that the Greylags had at least an average season. That being so a total of 64,000 is clearly disappointing when we might have expected at least 20,000 more. On the other hand, Greylags are much more prone than Pinkfeet to roost out on small patches of flood, so to get within a similar range of the expected total indicates a respectable counting effort!

For the third year running the March 1984 count was well down on the previous November, reinforcing the belief that the distribution and roosting behaviour of the birds is very different in spring compared to the autumn. The spring counts are almost certainly finding all the major concentrations, but presumably missing a great many small flocks.

The regional breakdown (below) shows the Greylags in November to have moved to south-west Scotland and north England in greater numbers than usual, perhaps as a result of food shortages further north.

Regional distribution of Pinkfeet and Greylags, Nov.1983 to Nov.1984

	PINKFEET			GREYLAGS		
	Nov. 1983	Mar. 1984	Nov. 1984	Nov. 1983	Mar. 1984	Nov. 1984
North Scotland	13.4	22.5	19.4	40.1	45.8	42.0
East central Scotland	38.8	26.5	32.0	33.9	16.5	26.4
South-east Scotland	27.5	4.6	12.6	9.9	4.0	5.0
South-west Scotland	2.9	34.9	6.7	12.3	21.8	20.1
North England	16.2	10.0	18.4	3.8	11.9	6.5
East England	1.2	1.5	10.9	-	-	-

Figures are percentages of total populations.

Spring census

The fourth in the new series of spring censuses of grey geese will take place over the weekend 16th/17th March 1985. Counters on my mailing list for this report will find the usual request form and postcard enclosed.

Acknowledgements

As always I am indebted to a great many people for the help, willingly given, in carrying out these censuses. And help this time meant turning out in miserable conditions, peering through rained up car windows and standing outside getting pretty wet. I had six sodden days of this myself and so I do know what people had to suffer! My thanks are due to the following:

J.T.Allan, I.J.Andrews, C.O.Badenoch, J.H.Ballantyne, J.A.G.Barnes, Dr M.V.Bell, J.Binney, L.G.Blacow, P.Bould, I.K.Brockway, A.W.Brown,

L.M.Brown, E.D.Cameron, C.R.G.Campbell, D.Campbell, G.Clark,
J.Cluckie, A.J.Clunas, J.A.P.Coats, Mr and Mrs A.F.Collett
R.Cook, D.A.Creasey, N.Crowther, R.H.Dennis, R.C.Dickson,
J.Dunbar, Rev & Mrs A.Duncan-Jones, Mrs M.Dunn, C.Eatough,
J.Edelsten, A.Emmerson, D.Ferguson, J.C.Fiddler, J.Findley,
W.D.Forshaw, J.A.Foster, J.Gearing, N.Gibson, P.R.Gordon, R.Gordon,
P.J.Gotham, Mrs J.A.R.Grant, Mr & Mrs H.Gray, Mr & Mrs H.Green,
J.F.D.Hargreaves, M.I.Harvey, C.G.Headlam, Mr & Mrs A.Henry,
C.Herold, B.Hickman, D.H.B.Howie, Dr D.Jenkins, R.Lambert,
S.Laybourne, Mr & Mrs J.Lister, D.Lord, D.McCara, W.J.McCulloch,
A.Macdonald, Mrs I.M.B.McKinnie, K.J.MacLeod, J.McNish, J.Malster,
R.P.Mason, F.Mawby, J.Mitchell, S.Mitchell, A.Moralee, M.Moss,
D.Mower, R.D.Murray, Mrs G.Nendick, A.Noltie, D.A.O'Connor,
J.Parkin, N.Picozzi, R.E.M.Pilcher, B.Pounder, P.Reynolds,
Dr R.Richter, R.J.Robertson, M.B.Ross, E & S.Shimeld, P.Shimmings,
N.Sills, E.M.Smith, Dr P.H.Smith, Dr R.A.H.Smith, R.W.J.Smith,
A.G.Stewart, J.W.Stewart, J.Swallow, S.Taylor, Miss V.M.Thom,
I.D.L.Thomson, J.H.Turner, L.A.Urquhart, R.Walker, J.H.Wallace,
R.Walls, S.R.Warman, A.D.Watson, J.E.Wilcox, J.D.Wilkins,
A.A.Wright, G.A.Wright, M.Wright, W.Wright, R.E.Youngman,
B.Zonfrillo.

6th February 1985

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